

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
----- 081030

R 281433Z JAN 76

FM AMEMBASSY CAPE TOWN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4903

INFO AMEMBASSY KINSHASA

AMEMBASSY LUSAKA

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 CAPE TOWN 0068

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MILI, AOUS, SF

SUBJ: STAFF DEL COUGHLIN VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA

REF: LUSAKA 215

1. SUMMARY: DURING VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA STAFFDEL COUGHLIN CONTINUED LOW-KEY AND CANDID APPROACH REGARDING ANGOLA. HIGH-RANKING SAG OFFICIALS OUTLINED IN GENERAL TERMS REASONS FOR SAG INVOLVEMENT, EXPLAINED THAT WITHDRAWAL PROMPTED BY MILITARY CONSIDERATIONS AND DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL PRESSURES AND THAT FAILURE OF "WESTERN WORLD" TO AID ANTI-MPLA FORCES HAS PROMPTED AFRICAN "LOSS OF FAITH IN WEST". OPPOSITION MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT STRESSED THAT SAG HAD MISREAD ANGOLAN SITUATION AND WORLD, PARTICULARLY US, REACTIONS. COUGHLIN EXPANDED ON HIS PESSIMISTIC VIEWS OF UNITA'S MILITARY SITUATION. END SUMMARY.

2. STAFFDEL COUGHLIN ACCOMPANIED BY EMBOFF MET JOINTLY WITH SAG SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS BRAND FOURIE AND CHIEF OF SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE ADMIRAL BIERMANN MORNING JANUARY 27. COUGHLIN CONTINUED FRANK AND LOW-KEY APPROACH HE HAS UTILIZED ELSEWHERE. FOURIE SOUGHT TO EXPLAIN SOUTH AFRICAN INVOLVEMENT IN ANGOLA. HE STATED THAT FIRST GOAL HAD BEEN TO PROTECT CUNENE HYDROELECTRIC AND IRRIGATION PROJECTS AFTER REPEATED REQUESTS TO

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PORTUGUESE TO DO SO HAD FAILED. WITHOUT BEING SPECIFIC

AS TO NATURE OF FURTHER INVOLVEMENT, FOURIE THEN SAID THAT LATER ACTIVITY DESIGNED TO FORESTALL SOVIET AND CUBAN MILITARY VICTORY AND TO PROVIDE TIME AND OPPORTUNITY FOR FORCES WITHIN ANGOLA, OAU AND "WESTERN WORLD" TO ASSESS SITUATION THERE AND TAKE MEANINGFUL ACTION. (THIS THEME REPEATED LATER SAME DAY ON FLOOR OF PARLIAMENT BY FONMIN MULLER.) TO COUGHLIN'S QUESTION ABOUT MOTIVATION OF SAG WITHDRAWAL, FOURIE REPLIED THAT SAG'S POSITION HAD BECOME POLITICALLY UNTENABLE BOTH DOMESTICALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. ADMIRAL BIERMANN SAID THAT SOUTH AFRICAN FORCES COULD HAVE DEFEATED HEAVILY ARMED CUBAN TROOPS IN HEAD-ON CONFRONTATION, BUT THAT THIS WOULD HAVE MEANT "ESCALATION OF WAR BEYOND LIMITED NATURE OF SOUTH AFRICAN'S INVOLVEMENT".

3. FOURIE STATED THAT IN SOME WAYS SOUTH AFRICAN HAD BENEFITED FROM ANGOLAN SITUATION AND THAT MANY BLACK AFRICAN NATIONS NOW HAD GREATER RESPECT FOR SAG. HE STATED THAT LACK OF RESPONSE FROM "WESTERN WORLD" TO NEEDS OF UNITA AND FNLA HAD PROMPTED "LOSS OF FAITH" IN WEST BY AFRICAN STATES. HE SAID THAT RUSSIANS HAD PROVED THEIR ABILITY TO BACK UP THEIR COMMITMENTS WHILE WEST HAD SHOWN ITSELF TO BE WEAK.

4. AFTER MEETING WITH FOURIE AND BIERMANN, COUGHLIN SPOKE SEPARATELY WITH PROGRESSIVE-REFORM PARTY MP VAN ZYL SLABBERT AND UNITED PARTY MP JAPPIE BASSON. SLABBERT

STATED THAT HIS CRITICISM OF SAG'S ANGOLA ACTIVITY RESTS ON GOVERNMENT BLUNDER IN MISPERCEIVING REACTION OF REST OF WORLD TO SAG INVOLVEMENT IN ANGOLA AND MISREADING OF WHAT LIKELY COURSES OF ACTION FOR WEST AND REST OF AFRICA WERE. BASSON'S CRITICISM WAS WIDER RANGING. HE ARGUED THAT SAG HAS NOW RUINED ANY CHANCES FOR ACCOMMODATION WITH MPLA AND AS RESULT WILL HAVE TO CONFRONT BITTER ENEMY ON

NAMIBIA'S NORTHERN BORDER.

5. BOTH SLABBERT AND BASSON AMPLIFIED FOURIE'S REMARKS ABOUT WITHDRAWAL AS AT LEAST PARTLY MOTIVATED BY DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS BY NOTING STRONG OPPOSITION OF
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FAR RIGHT WINGERS. BOTH SUGGESTED THAT RECENT CABINET SHUFFLE IN WHICH NOTED NATIONAL PARTY RIGHTIST WAS MADE A DEPUTY MINISTER WAS AIMED TO PLACATE EXTREMIST AFRIKANERS WHO UPSET THAT, IN THEIR VIEW, WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN BOYS BEING SENT TO FIGHT IN ANGOLAN BATTLE BETWEEN "TERRORIST GROUPS", WHILE AT SAME TIME, SAG UNWILLING TO AID STABLE WHITE GOVERNMENT OF RHODESIA.

6. BASSON ALSO ADDED INTERESTING POINT THAT HE BELIEVES SAG'S EXTENDED INVOLVEMENT IN ANGOLA, THAT IS, BEYOND CUNENE, LARGELY PROMPTED BY VORSTER'S DESIRE TO PLEASE KAUNDA. HE VIEWS THIS INVOLVEMENT AS EARNEST OF VORSTER'S WILLINGNESS TO BACK UP DETENTE RHETORIC WITH POSITIVE ACTION.

7. IN HIS CONVERSATIONS WITH SOUTH AFRICANS AND EMBASSY OFFICERS, COUGHLIN GAVE HIS PERCEPTION OF MILITARY SITUATION IN ANGOLA. FOLLOWING IS GENERAL SUMMARY OF HIS VIEWS WHICH EMBASSY OFFERS WITH KNOWLEDGE THAT SOME STATEMENTS DUPLICATE POINTS COUGHLIN MADE IN LUSAKA 215:

A. ON SOUTH AFRICAN INVOLVEMENT: COUGHLIN STATED THAT BETWEEN 1200 AND 2000 SOUTH AFRICANS WERE INVOLVED IN ANGOLA, AND THESE TROOPS WERE THOSE ASSOCIATED WITH THE MANY ELAND ARMORED CARS WHICH WERE DEPLOYED TO VARIOUS PARTS OF THE COUNTRY. ON ABOUT JAN 21 THE SOUTH AFRICAN COMMANDER IN ANGOLA (NAME UNKNOWN) HANDED A LETTER TO SAVIMBI WHICH INFORMED HIM OF THE DECISION OF THE SAG TO WITHDRAW SA FORCES. BY JAN 23 ALL SA TROOPS AND THEIR EQUIPMENT HAD DEPARTED. THEY TOOK WITH THEM ALL THEIR MATERIAL AND EQUIPMENT LEAVING ONLY AVIATION FUEL IN PLACE AT SILVA PORTO. THE EVACUATION WAS PRIMARILY BY ROAD; HOWEVER, C-130 AIRCRAFT WERE ALSO USED.
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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 /026 W
----- 081632

R 281433Z JAN 76
FM AMEMBASSY CAPE TOWN
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4904
INFO AMEMBASSY KINSHASA
AMEMBASSY LUSAKA

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EXDIS

B. ON FUTURE OF UNITA: SAVIMBI TOLD COUGHLIN THAT AT A MAXIMUM UNITA COULD HOLD OUT FOR ONLY 2-3 WEEKS. THIS CONTRASTED WITH OPINION OF PORTUGUESE MILITARY AUTHORITIES WITH WHOM COUGHLIN SPOKE WHO INDICATED THAT THIS WAS OPTIMISTIC AND THAT 2-3 DAYS WOULD BE MORE REALISTIC ESTIMATE. SAVIMBI STATED THAT HE COULD NOT MATCH THE SOPHISTICATED HARDWARE BEING THROWN AGAINST HIM BY THE MPLA. SAVIMBI TOLD COUGHLIN THAT HE OBSERVED A JET FIGHTER FLYING OVER THE UNITA POSITIONS RECENTLY AND THAT HELICOPTER GUNSHIPS WERE BEING USED AGAINST THEM. WHEN COUGHLIN QUESTIONED HIM (SAVIMBI) ON THE TYPE OF AIRCRAFT, SAVIMBI READILY ADMITTED HE HAD NO IDEA. SAVIMBI INDICATED THAT TO WAGE A WAR ON A FRONTAL BASIS ARMED ONLY WITH BASIC SMALL ARMS, BAZOOKAS AND CAPTURED SOVIET ROCKETS WAS FUTILE. COUGHLIN NOTED THAT THERE WAS NOTHING ON THE BATTLEFRONT WHICH COULD COUNTER THE 122 MM ROCKET WHICH WERE USED IN BATTERY AGAINST THE LIGHTLY ARMED UNITA FORCES. COUGHLIN OPINED THAT TO WAGE SUCH A WAR THE UNITA LEVEL OF WEAPONS SOPHISTICATION MUST BE RAISED TO AT LEAST PARITY WITH HEAT-SEEKING SHOULDERED-FIRED MISSILES SUCH AS THE RED EYE AND A LONG RANGE COUNTER-BATTERY CAPABILITY TO COUNTER THE 122MM ROCKET. HE SAID THAT EVEN SOUTH AFRICA WAS ILL-EQUIPPED TO COUNTER THE SOVIET TECHNICAL THREAT IN ANGOLA WITHOUT A MASSIVE INFUSION OF MODERN EQUIPMENT AND SEASONED SOLDIERS.

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COUGHLIN STATED THAT THE ONLY REASON UNITA IS STILL EXISTENT AS A QUASI-VIABLE OVERT FORCE IS THAT RUSSIANS AND CUBANS HAD NOT CONDUCTED AN AGGRESSIVE RECONNAISSANCE EFFORT TO KEEP TABS ON SOUTH AFRICAN PRESENCE. HE FELT THAT SOUTH AFRICANS WERE KEY TO ANY SUCCESSES ACHIEVED BY THE UNITA TROOPS AND WITH THEIR DEPARTURE, THERE REMAINED LITTLE HOPE FOR ANYTHING BUT A TOTAL DEFEAT. HE STATED WHEN THE MPLA LEARNS OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEPARTURE THERE WILL BE A FINAL OFFENSIVE TO THE SOUTH. SAVIMBI STATED THAT WHEN HE IS DEFEATED MILITARILY, HE WILL RETURN TO THE BUSH TO WAGE A GUERRILLA WAR AGAINST THE MPLA.

C. ON FUTURE RELATIONS BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICA AND UNITA: SAVIMBI STATED TO COUGHLIN THAT AS A RESULT OF SOUTH AFRICAN ASSISTANCE AND EFFORTS IN BEHALF OF UNITA, HE (SAVIMBI) WOULD RENDER NO SUPPORT TO SWAPO EFFORTS DIRECTED AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA IN NAMIBIA.

8. COMMENT: COUGHLIN MADE VIRTUALLY NO EFFORT TO ELICIT INFORMATION FROM THE EMBASSY. ACTING DAO SPENT HOUR-AND-HALF WITH HIM IN JOHANNESBURG, AND I HAD HIM OUT TO RESIDENCE FOR LUNCH DURING WHICH HE DID PRACTICALLY ALL OF THE TALKING.

I RECEIVED IMPRESSION THAT BRIEFINGS HE RECEIVED FROM SAVIMBI AND HIS EXCHANGES WITH SOUTH AFRICANS SATISFIED WHAT SEEMED TO BE HIS PRINCIPAL INTEREST: THE STATUS OF THE FIGHTING IN ANGOLA AND THE NATURE OF SAG INVOLVEMENT. ON VARIOUS OCCASTIONS, COUGHLIN MADE SELF-SERVING ARGUMENT THAT HE BELIEVED GOOD CASE COULD HAVE BEEN MADE FOR OVERT US ASSISTANCE TO UNITA AND FNLA BUT THAT "ADMINISTRATION NEVER ATTEMPTED TO DO SO". HE FURTHER STATED THAT IT NOW PROBABLY TOO LATE TO PROVIDE ANY SORT OF MEANINGFUL OVERT ASSISTANCE TO SAVIMBI.

9. ONLY POSSIBLE PROBLEM FOR SOUTH AFRICANS I FORESEE FROM COUGHLIN'S VISIT IS SAVIMBI'S REPORTED CANDOR ON HIS CONTACTS WITH SAG OFFICIALS. WHEN COUGHLIN RECOUNTED THESE TO BRAND FOURIE, FOURIE MANIFESTED SURPRISE AND CONCERN THAT SAVIMBI HAD DESCRIBED SUCH CONTACTS ON THE RECORD.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: MILITARY ASSISTANCE, POLITICAL SITUATION, DIPLOMATIC DISCUSSIONS, COMBAT OPERATIONS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 28 JAN 1976
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: buchant0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976CAPET00068
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D760033-1073
From: CAPE TOWN
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760115/aaaaamkp.tel
Line Count: 248
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 76 LUSAKA 215
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: buchant0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 01 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <01 JUL 2004 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <14 OCT 2004 by buchant0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: STAFF DEL COUGHLIN VISIT TO SOUTH AFRICA
TAGS: PFOR, MILI, OREP, MOPS, MASS, AO, SF, US, UNITA, (COUGHLIN), (FOURIE, BRAND), (BIERMANN)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006